Synopsis of the Thesis Entitled

The Novels of Olga Tokarczuk: A Study in Myths, History and Culture

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Introduction

The first Polish Nobel laureate since the poet Wisława Szymborska in 1996 , Olga Tokarczuk (b.1962-) has been aptly described by the renowned scholar-critic, James Wood as “a talented redescriber of the world”. Being the most popular and flourishing activist-writer of her generation, she has a string of bestsellers to her name and a characteristic style that blends the real with the mystical. Distinguished by her mythical tone and recurring questions of Polish identity, her writings provide a glimpse of the world in “a markedly different, thoroughly refreshing light.” Her portrayal of a polychromatic world perpetually in motion, with characters' traits intermingled and skillfully used language has stormed the literary world all over the globe. While declaring her as the 2018 Nobel awardee for Literature (although honoured in 2019), the Swedish Academy praised her for "narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life". It further added that she "never views reality as something stable or everlasting. She constructs her novels in a tension between cultural opposites; nature versus culture, reason versus madness, male versus female, home versus alienation". She was born and brought up in the town of Sulechow located in western Poland. She studied psychology at the University of Warsaw and worked as a therapist for a few years in the western city of Walbrzych. Following the success of her early books, she turned to writing full time and settled in the Sudety mountains near the Czech border. She has been criticized by some groups in Poland as unpatriotic, anti-Christian and a promoter of eco-terrorism.

She has denied the allegations, has described herself as a "true patriot" and has said that groups criticizing her are xenophobic and damage Poland's international reputation. Her fictional debut *The Journey of the Book-People* (1993) was a philosophical parable set in seventeenth-century France. It records a failed expedition to find a mysterious book. Her next novel *E.E.* (1995) narrates the titular character Erna Eltzner’s story. She is the young daughter of a German industrialist and a Polish woman who swoons upon seeing an unknown man in her parents’ kitchen. It is about the surprising sensitivity of the human nature intrinsic in the young soul, and also the frightening strength of the sixth sense lying dormant in each of us. Her third novel, *Primeval and Other Times* (1996) switches to the 20th century and traces the checkered history of several generations of a Polish family. Her massive work *The Books of Jacob* (Księgi Jakubowe, 2014) deals with the most difficult questions of Poland's diverse multiethnic, multi

confessional and multicultural history. It is based on the historical story of Jacob Frank, a heretical Jew who converted to Christianity and styled himself as Messiah in the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century It spans seven countries, three religions and five languages, tracing the history of Frankism, a Jewish messianic sect that sprang up in Poland in the 18th century. Her magnum opus *Flights* (Bieguni, 2007) captivated readers with its elaborate collage of discrete and interconnected tales, sketches, meditations and ideas revolving around the theme of human movement. Her recent novel *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (2018) is a good specimen of detective fiction containing a bizarre series of crimes.

Hypothesis of the Research:

Olga Tokarczuk's fictional oeuvre abounds in mythical subversions, historical incident and socio-cultural dynamics of Poland. Her characters act as symbols of patriarchy, brutality, cruelty and sexist male culture. She never views reality as stable or everlasting. She constructs her novels in a tension between cultural opposites: nature versus culture, reason versus madness, male versus female, home versus alienation. Her novels are replete with Polish myths, religious and historical characters and socio-cultural aspects offering a protest against a misogynist culture. By employing varied narrative strategies, she deftly questions dominant discourses of Polish history and culture, such as that of the "Recovered Territories" or the power of religious faith. The presence of the magical realist mode in her novels has important implications for the study of magical realism in general and Polish literary studies in particular.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to make a close reading of the selected texts with an emphasis on Polish history, mythology, religion, politics and socio-cultural factors. An in-depth analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's novels will provide valuable hints to these aspects. Some of the major objectives of this study can be specified as below:

1. To analyse the selected novels in terms of Olga Tokarczuk's world-view, her characters and thematic concerns, language, style, use of myths and historical events.
2. To explore the mythical subversions, historical events and socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary Polish society.

3. To questions the dominant discourses of Polish history, culture, religion and patriarchal society .
4. To evaluate the post-modern techniques and magic realist modes used in the novels of Olga Tokarczuk.
5. To juxtapose Poland's diverse multiethnic, multi-confessional and multicultural history with other countries of the globe, especially India
6. To compare and contrast her writings with other contemporary women writers with a view to underline her substantial contribution to the Polish literary tradition.

Research Methodology and Chapter Scheme:

The research work is investigative and interpretative in nature. It mostly deals with the textual analysis of the selected novels of Olga Tokarczuk. It depends upon the textual study of primary and secondary sources having references of the writers work documents, reviews in journals, essays and magazines, reports, memoranda, research papers, letters and interviews. The methodology advocated by the latest MLA handbook is followed for the purpose of document, endnotes, quotations bibliography etc by the investigator. The tentative scheme of chapterization is as below:

Chapter -1 Introduction

Chapter -2 Theoretical Perspectives

Chapter -3 Olga Tokarczuk: Bio-literary Profile

Chapter -4 Contextualizing Myths, History and Culture in the selected novels

Chapter -5 Conclusion

Scope and limitation of the Research:

The study intends to make an in-depth exploration of the selected novels of Olga Tokarczuk. Therefore, the scope of the study is confined to the critical analysis of her major novels, her worldview, thematic concerns and other literary aspects. Her novels are full of irony and her formation of fictitious bridges linking people, generations and cultures, especially inhabitants of the border territories of Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic, who have had

often different existential and historical experience. Hence, it does not require any ground work. The unique compilation of the novel of novelist, her interviews and critical literature about the novel are sufficient for present work. The selected novels are as below:

***1. The Journey of the Book-People* (1993)**

This novel is an interesting tale, balancing on the line between philosophical parable and fairy tale. Tokarczuk formulated her imaginative philosophy around this very idea:'for me, writing books is telling yourself stories in a language born between sleep and waking.' As in most tales, the plot of *The Journey of the Book-People* is a journey as a means to master reality: 'All journeys begin the same way: you could say that the traveler is unpleasant on their own space.' Here one finds the theme of travel as a symbol for life – a thought Tokarczuk would later expand upon in her well-known novel, Flights**.**

2. ***E. E.* (1995):**

Her second novel E.E revolves around the shaky chaos of human existence on which lies the otherworldly glow of otherness. It is the year 1908 – a sort of frontier time in the history of the human condition: suffragettes protest discrimination against women, the sweet haze of decadence floats around artist salons, Dr. Freud plunges patients and readers into pools of the subconscious and underlying sexuality. The novel's main character is the young Erna Eltzner, the daughter of a German industrialist and a Polish woman. One day, she swoons upon seeing an unknown man in her parents' kitchen, who neither her family nor the household servants seemed to have noticed, as if she is invisible to them. The novel is about the surprising sensitivity of the human nature intrinsic in the young soul, and also the frightening and dangerous strength of the sixth sense lying dormant in each of us.

3. ***Primeval and other Times* (1996)**

The novel is an amalgamation of the elements a family story, an epic of Polish history and the very factual mythology of daily life. It's written in the tradition of magical realism which earned satisfying comparisons to the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This book opens with the line "Primeval is a place that lies in the centre of the universe". The small village of Primeval (Prawiek in Polish) in the center of Poland is a sign of 20th-century Poland and a metaphor for

the whole world: a magical and unfathomable cycle, where truth is intimately entangled with the realm of myth, Christianity with paganism, civilization with natural elements, and quiet daily life with the iron tread of history. Before our eyes, this chronicle of the Boski and Niebieski families becomes a chronicle of the human race.

4. *House of Day, House of Night* (1998)

This is not merely a book of stories, but a freakish mixture of immensely diverse tales with a semi-mystic underside, close explanation of the changing between day and night, the lives of saints, descriptions of dreams and even recipes for mushroom dishes. The novel's hero dwells in a clandestine home on the outskirts of Nowa Ruda, 'a city of hairdressers, second-hand clothes shops, men whose eyelids have become entrenched with coal dust', at the foot of the Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border. By watching the lives of her neighbours (the elderly wigmaster Marta, who sees spirits and many other things) and communicating with them, she not only begins to better realize the world, but also unlock fresh dimensions of truth, unreachable from a surface glance. An important support in this are dreams, and not just her own – the protagonist is a collector of other people's dreams, the most interesting of which (like, for example, how a character called Krystyna managed to discover a stranger dreaming about her) she shares with us the reader. For the novel House of Day, House of Night, Tokarczuk used the technique of non-linear narrative for the first time in her writing career.

5. *Flights* (2007)

Olga Tokarczuk's most famous work, for which the novelist won the Man Booker International Prize in 2018, is at first glance not fairly reliable with the classic idea of a novel. It has an odd composition – like a patchwork quilt or a thorough map of an unknown bright sky. It is a multifaceted, multi-plot novel with a collective hero: the non-linear arrangement of the book unfurls through numerous novellas and short stories, notes 'in the margins', overheard conversations, dreams, letters, curious facts. However, such diversity doesn't create the novel disjointed or clumsy at all: all of the parts are skillfully en suite together, and while approaching the ending you begin to see, almost physically feel, that all of these stories are strongly entangled with each other, forming a imaginary pattern, the gracefulness of which could by the greed of snowflake crystals.

The synchronization of this novel, which critics compared to the ripples of a marble tossed into water, is provided by the reality that all the heroes of *Flights* are in steady movement, on a path, on a road, sitting in buses and airplanes, steamboats and trains. journey for them is not just a part of life, but life itself, like, for instance, for the members of the sect of "flee-ers", loathers of established survival and thinking that only constant movement in space will aid a person slip away from the hold of the Antichrist and the chains of Babylon. Tokarczuk's characters could make the well-known words of philosopher Gregory Skovorda into a motto: "The world tried to catch me but could not." However, it's wrong to think that this flight from suffocating certainty for them is an end in itself. An attentive reader will surely see a certain phrase is repeated several times throughout this rather extensive novel: "The purpose of the pilgrimage is another pilgrim". Not one accidental meeting on the road is actually accidental, as it helps us through the incomprehensibility of the other to see the infinity of one's own "I".

6. *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (2009)

Olga Tokarczuk is well-known for her dynamic support of animal rights movements and other ecological initiatives. She does not hide her left-wing, feminist, and anticlerical views, which, it must be said, tend to irritate several Polish politicians. Therefore it's not shocking that the author's social positions are also reflected in her books. This novel provides an amazing display of the qualities that have made her so notable a presence in existing literature. The novel is almost impossible to categories , can be called an ecological detective novel or a philosophical thriller It is, in effect, a murder mystery: in the bleak Polish midwinter, men in a remote village are being murdered, and it is left to Janina Duszejko, a type of eastern European Miss Marple, to spot the killer. Tokarczuk calls her novel 'a fairy tale with elements of a political pamphlet'. Those who hastened to accuse her heroine of 'eco-terrorism' clearly took the book the adaptation too literally, overlooking the most important thing – the metaphor.

7. ***The Books of Jacob*** (Księgi Jakubowe, 2014)

This massive narrative is a unique melting pot of faiths, nationalities and cultures.In the centre of this vast historical-literary canvas, skillfully woven from the luxurious fabric of Central European history, is the turbulent life of a charismatic Jewish heretic, mystic and adventurer, Jacob Frank, who has declared himself the Messiah. The novel's main character

is perpetually crossing these boundaries, and with such ardour, as if 'the whole world is not enough' for him. And what underscores this passion, this indefatigability during the quest, is the entirely sumptuous style of the book – its language is lush, baroque, matching the era depicted, but at the same time very much alive and therefore, surprisingly modern.

Significance of the Research:

This study is will certainly be useful for literary students, teachers and readers interested in the novels of Olga Tokarczuk. Her novels combine the elements of a family story, epic of polish history and very factual mythology of daily life. Olga Tokarczuk is inspired by maps and a perspective from above, which tends to make her microcosm, a mirror of macrocosm. It also assits to comprehend "Drive your plow over the bones of the dead" is in effect a murder mystery: but also a primer on the politics of vegetarianism, a dark feminist comedy, an existentialist legend and a paean to William Blake. *Flights* is a fragmentary novel the original Polish title refers to runaways, a sect of old believers, who believe that being in constant motion is a trick to avoid evil. The wide coverage, geographically and chronologically, allows the research to function as an overview of or introduction to her active support of animal rights movements and other ecological initiatives. She does not hide her left-wing, feminist, and anticlerical views, which, it must be said, tend to annoy many Polish politicians

Scope for Further Research

The outcome is based on the primary and secondary sources of Olga Tokarczuk's novel with different view. This research will definitely give rise to the possibilities of new traditions of studying the novel of Olga Tokarczuk in particular polish. A contender researcher can discover and investigate the issue of self and culture in following ways:

The study of socio-cultural issues in the novel of Olga Tokarczuk

The study of social and cultural conflict in the novel world of Olga Tokarczuk

The analysis of the theme of mythological tone of polish history

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